

# The Briefing



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## Magic, science and religion

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Most magic is essentially the same as religion: it is a human attempt to contact the supernatural and, perhaps, manipulate it. Most magic seeks to achieve ends by getting supernatural beings to bypass the normal workings of nature. Religion also seeks supernatural aid, although the purpose is usually more lofty (to do with the afterlife or basic sustenance, not overt power) and the means involves more veneration. Also, generally, the being involved in religion is on a broader scale than those involved in magic: gods are generally conceived as being bigger, more universal, and more powerful than the demons, ghosts or spirits called upon in magic. But these are differences of degree or emphasis, not of fundamentals.

Magic and science are also overlapping categories. Magic does not just call upon supernatural personalities, but upon the forces of nature. Astrology, alchemy, geomancy and other occult arts, which were defended as 'natural' magic during the Middle Ages, were as much attempts to understand the true workings of the natural world and to manipulate them to human ends as science was and is. Probably those caught up in magic tended to be somewhat more romantic and fanciful than the typical natural philosopher, but that is a very rough generalization and there are many exceptions. The tradition of natural magic merges with the tradition of natural science. They are not rivals, nor did one supplant the other; science was merely those parts of natural magic (plus other things) that ended up being properly substantiated, and, with Protestant Christianity, science took on a more hard-nosed, mechanistic, non-romantic character. But in essence, magic and science are not much different, and the differences of tone are attributable to various outside forces and social attitudes, not to any essential difference between magic and science.

Science has, from time to time, brought back some of the romantic tone: think of the nature philosophy of Goethe and late 19th-century German scientists. There is much in materialistic science which is just as mystical as neoplatonic magic; it's just that the fashion among scientists is to tame such forces as electricity and magnetism by quantifying and labelling them 'natural', even if they remain exactly the same concept as what the natural magicians called 'occult'.

Christianity cuts right across this by demonstrating that all religion is useless, and that all natural activity is supernatural. It has rendered magic powerless by defeating all the supernatural beings who used to be the active force in magic. These beings continue to be defeated by the preaching of the gospel, which is the declaration of victory over them. How exactly does this happen? We're never told explicitly, and it could be by a number of different means. It could be that the beings are, in fact, rendered powerless in places where the gospel is preached, or perhaps they are effectively rendered powerless by people no longer turning to them or fearing them so that they no longer have a 'channel' into the world. It does not appear that such beings all over the world immediately lost their power 2,000 years ago; after all, the apostles in Acts still came across them, but were easily able to silence them. It also seems they are still active in certain animist religions, and perhaps even in the depths of western spiritualism and occult (ouija boards and so on). But in any case, Christians need not fear them, for the gospel is more powerful; it is not possible for Christians to be inadvertently 'infected' by spiritual evil powers. If Christians are led astray by supernatural evil powers, it is due to the stupidity and disobedience of the Christian deciding to believe some foolish spirit rather than Jesus. The danger there is no different from deciding to follow the world's teaching on sex, addiction or tolerance; in fact, they will end up looking very similar.

And it is, perhaps, adults, more than children, who are in greater danger from these things appearing in a benign form in children's literature. Children are well able to tell the difference between fact and fiction, whereas adults seem to lose this tendency as they become more disenchanted with the real world. In fact, adults are quite capable of building elaborate fantasy worlds in which they live, simply ignoring discrepancies which turn up and being wilfully blind to the problems that their world vision has with reality. They go on believing that people are fundamentally good, or that women are good and men are evil, or that all children are little angels, or that crystals can cure illness, face creams can prevent ageing, all religions are true, and democracy will prevent wars. It is adults who start real witches' covens, who try to perform spells and who dance around stones naked. Children are much more sensible; they know when they are playing a game and when it is time to get back to reality.